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To:

The South Asia Faculty Textbook
Committee Members and Consultants

Respected professors and scholars,

I have been forwarded a copy of your letter to the Instructional Quality Commission and the California Board of Education dated February 24. It has been instructive to me for several reasons.

The first is that I have had the honour of being singled out for a personal comment: "It may be important to note that Michel Danino, of the International Forum for India's Heritage does not have a Ph.D. He is of course entitled to his opinion, but he has no certified competence to assess matters of social/scientific, historical, or philological interpretation." (Endnote 1) It is quite correct that I do not hold a PhD; but the implication that it is necessary to do so in order to acquire a "certified competence to assess" historical matters is strange in the extreme. May I remind you how:

- The formidable U.S. archaeologist Eric Thompson held that the Mayan script consisted mostly of ideograms of a mystical or religious nature. He was proved wrong.
- The distinguished British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans held that the Linear B writing system did not encode Greek; he was proved wrong (by the non-PhD holder Michael Ventris).
- Closer to our times and concerns, the British archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler argued forcefully that skeletons found in Mohenjo-daro's streets were relics of a massacre by invading Aryans; he was proved wrong.
- The medievalist historian Prof. Irfan Habib, eager to produce archaeological evidence for Aryan invasions into India, writes: "Gumla [and] Rana Ghundai were destroyed with such violence as to leave traces in the archaeological record. Similar traces of arson are found also at ... Nal and the Indus border settlement of Dabar-kot. The inference, then, seems irresistible: that there were invasions from the west which overwhelmed, first, the Helmand cities, then, the late Kot-Diji culture and, finally, the Indus civilization."¹ Prof. Habib fails to realize that all those evidences for arson apply to the transition from the

Early to the Mature phase, not to the end of the Mature phase; if we go by his “evidence”, we should therefore have to place the Aryan invasions just before the Mature phase!

- The eminent historian Prof. Romila Thapar. Prof. Thapar errs similarly when she asserts that “some settlements in the north-west and Punjab might have been subjected to raids and skirmishes, such as are described in the Rig-Veda, or for which there appears to be occasional evidence at some sites, for example Kot Diji.”² She also finds that following the decline of the Harappan civilization, continuities “were restricted to mythologies, rituals and concepts of tradition, since the material culture does not show continuities.”³ Prof. Thapar seems unaware that since the days of Marshall and Mackay, archaeologists have filled hundreds of pages documenting the material legacy of the Harappan civilization, especially in the fields of technologies, crafts, art, iconography, and metrology.
- Prof. D.N. Jha, a historian of ancient India, writes, “It is likely that the early Aryans had some consciousness of their distinctive physical appearance. They were generally fair, the indigenous people dark in complexion. The colour of the skin may have been an important mark of their identity.”⁴ This is, of course, a throwback to 19th-century racial theories about the Aryans; Prof. Jha does not appear to know that post-WWII scholarship has rejected such theories, and that all passages from the Rig-Veda supposedly referring to skin colour have been shown to be unreliable (for instance by M. Schetelich, G. Erdosy or H.H. Hock).
- The Sanskritist Prof. Michael Witzel, mistranslating a passage from the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra*, found in it a “direct statement” of the “immigration of Indo-Aryans into South Asia.”⁵ His translation was proved wrong by several scholars, from Dr. Koenraad Elst to Prof. B.B. Lal. In the same paper, Prof. Witzel also stated that according the Rig-Veda, some of the Vedic clans “have ‘crossed many rivers’, and ‘have gone through narrow passages’, which once again indicates the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan.”⁶ This was another brave attempt to produce literary evidence for the Indo-Aryan migrations into the subcontinent. However, upon crosschecking (I do not repeat the references here but am ready to supply them if desired), I found that the above two quotations turned out to be nonexistent. In the first case, he juxtaposed several hymns which speak of crossing *a* river, in the singular; no hymn speaks of “crossing many rivers”; in the second, all that the hymn says is “we have come into a pathless country; the broad earth has become narrow”, which becomes “narrow passages” (in the plural) in Prof. Witzel’s interpretation, and therefore a reference to Afghanistan!

- Prof. Kancha Ilaiah, a political scientist and a strong supporter of the Aryan invasion theory in its violent and racial 19th-century version, asserts that “The buffalo is a Dravidian animal, whereas the cow is an Aryan animal. The buffalo is a black animal and we are black people. ... [Aryans] brought the cow along with them.”⁷ Prof. Ilaiah does not appear to know that domesticated cattle is in evidence in the Neolithic phases of Mehrgarh into the 7th or 6th millennium BCE.

I could go on and on, but I hope I have made my point that holding a PhD or chair professorship is no guarantee of “certified competence”, no guarantee also against errors or even howlers. That apart, it is most strange that you should present your theories as an established final truth (even though few among you are experts in Indian protohistory or early history), and do not recognize the tentative and subjective nature of archaeological and historical models and interpretations, which have always had a short shelf-life (or half-life if you prefer). If some among you are convinced that their current conclusions and theories will live to be confirmed twenty years from today, I must congratulate them on their optimism.

Secondly, I note that your “important” note on me is attached to a sentence on “groups espousing Hindu nationalist views”. This attempt to portray me, by implication, as a “Hindu nationalist” is little more than a diversionary tactic to avoid discussing the scholarly arguments I presented in my notes (which you kindly call “opinions”). For your information, I have no association or affiliation with any group, “nationalist” or not. My only current affiliation is with Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, where I have been a guest professor for almost five years and have helped set up an Archaeological Sciences Centre (where Prof. Mark Kenoyer recently stayed as a scholar-in-residence). I have also been a long-time admirer of the high achievements of ancient and classical Indian civilization, which led me to take up residence in India some four decades ago and eventually acquire Indian citizenship – if this constitutes “Hindu nationalism”, then I plead guilty. You complain in your letter about unspecified “hostile comments we have received”; if you did receive such hostile comments, I will support your complaint, but would ask you not to indulge in the same clumsy ad-hominem attacks yourselves.

I was approached with a request to assess a draft chapter on India of the revision to the California Framework for History-Social Studies currently under way. In addition, I wrote on 19 November a few critical comments on your 22-page “South Asia Studies Faculty Review of Proposed California Curriculum Framework” submitted to the Instructional Quality Commission. I decided to do so as I found your representation to the IQC intellectually and academically flawed:

1. It sought to give a false impression that mainstream academics had reached a virtual unanimity on the questions addressed, especially the validity of the

Indo-Aryan invasion or migration into the India subcontinent. However, such unanimity can be projected only by eclipsing the rejection of such a scenario by many eminent experts, such as, in this case, Edmund Leach, Kenneth A.R. Kennedy, Jim Shaffer, Jean-François Jarrige, Henri-Paul Francfort, Peter G. Johansen, Toomas Kivisild, Angela Marcantonio (also non-mainstream but nevertheless solid scholars, such as Koenraad Elst or Nicholas Kazanas). I could add many respected Indian archaeologists, such as the late Dr V.N. Misra or Prof. B.B. Lal, but I suspect from your representations, which do not cite a single Indian archaeologist, that you are not exceedingly interested in their views. Be that as it may, it is not sound scholarly practice to pretend that divergent viewpoints do not exist.

2. It concealed or misrepresented findings at several points, as your present letter again does, for instance when you assert that no remains of the horse have been found at Indus sites, while remains (either of bones or teeth) have actually been identified at no fewer than 12 sites by respected archaeologists from Dr. Bhola Nath to Prof. P.K. Mathews or Prof. Pramod Joglekar, whose work you completely blank out (I will not proceed here with the evidence: you can find extensive details in a recent paper of mine on the issue⁸). The same attitude was displayed when you dealt with genetics (cherry picking would be an apt description; you can see a detailed review of recent studies by the geneticist Dr. B.M. Reddy,⁹ and a fairly detailed discussion of the available evidence in two papers of mine, one of them forthcoming¹⁰).

I find a few more shortcomings in your present letter:

1. You write that “The geo-archeological evidence also cannot *by definition*, show signs of migration—it can neither prove nor falsify Aryan migration into pre-modern South Asia.” If that is so, why have generations of linguists, archaeologists and Indo-Europeanists tried so hard to find precisely such evidence? Will you offer a detailed critique, for instance, of the work of Prof. Asko Parpola, who has written numerous books and papers tracing the incoming Aryans not only on the subcontinent but beyond, stage after stage through a multiplicity of *material* cultures? And why do you contradict yourselves by asserting that, in “more recent work”, “Kenoyer also considers the archeological record of the Painted Grey Ware culture (1200-800 BCE) and the Northern Black Polished Ware culture (700-300 BCE) to be convincing for correlating it to Vedic culture”? Can archaeological evidence identify “Vedic culture” or not? And if it can, what are the “convincing” criteria used by Prof. Kenoyer in the case of PGW to establish its “Vedic” character? And why did numerous mainstream scholars opt instead for Cemetery H, Gandhara Grave or Pirak cultures as evidence of “Aryan” settlements?

It would have been more honest and accurate to state that proponents of the Aryan migration theory having failed to find support for it in archaeology have decided to look for evidence elsewhere — for such is the historical fact of the dilution of a violent, massive Aryan invasion (still favoured by many Indian historians, see the late R.S. Sharma’s work, for instance) into a milder scenario of a largely peaceful immigration, limited enough (sometimes reduced to a “trickle”) to conveniently escape detection on the ground.

2. Your statement that “no linguist asserts that India is the homeland of the Indo-European languages” is disingenuous, as it conceals the lack of agreement among linguists as to an original PIE homeland, even after two centuries of search, and, more importantly, as to the arborescent model or even the validity of an IE family of languages. As I showed in my note of 18 November 2015, from N.S. Trubetskoy to Angela Marcantonio or April McMahon, we have a number of eminent dissenters as to the validity of PIE or the need for a homeland at all.

Neither your earlier 22-page review nor your current letter do justice to these complex issues; you content yourselves with presenting a nonexistent “consensus”, using the classic fallacy of argument from authority.

Let me end with Edmund Leach, whose path-breaking 1989 paper¹¹ has been studiously ignored by all proponents of the Aryan scenario: “Why do serious scholars persist in believing in the Aryan invasions? ... Who finds it attractive? Why has the development of early Sanskrit come to be so dogmatically associated with an Aryan invasion? ... The Aryan invasions never happened at all. Of course no one is going to believe that.”

With best regards,
Michel Danino

¹ Irfan Habib, *The Indus Civilization*, vol. 2 in *A People’s History of India*, Tulika Books, 2nd edn, New Delhi, 2003, p. 64.

² Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2002, p. 88.

³ Ibid.

⁴ D.N. Jha, *Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2nd edn, 1998, p. 49.

⁵ Michael Witzel, “Rgvedic history: poets, chieftains and polities”, in George Erdosy, (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*, Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995, pp. 320–321.

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- ⁶ Ibid., p. 322.
- ⁷ Kancha Ilaiah, in "[The Rediff Interview / Dr Kancha Ilaiah](#)", 17 January 2000.
- ⁸ Michel Danino, "[The Horse and the Aryan Debate](#)", in D.K. Chakrabarti & Makkhan Lal, (eds), *History of Ancient India*, vol. 3: *The Texts, Political History and Administration till c. 200 BC*, Vivekananda International Foundation & Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2014, pp. 30–43.
- ⁹ B.M. Reddy, "People of India: implications of recent DNA studies", in D.K. Chakrabarti & Makkhan Lal, (eds), *History of Ancient India*, vol. 1: *Prehistoric Roots*, Vivekananda International Foundation & Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2014, pp 28–58.
- ¹⁰ Michel Danino, "[Genetics and the Aryan Issue](#)", in D.K. Chakrabarti & Makkhan Lal, (eds), *History of Ancient India*, vol. 3: *The Texts, Political History and Administration till c. 200 BC*, Vivekananda International Foundation & Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2014, pp. 44–64; "Aryans and the Indus Civilization: Archaeological, Skeletal, and Molecular Evidence", in Gwen Robbins Schug & Subhash R. Walimbe, (eds), *A Companion to South Asia in the Past*, Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2016, pp. 205-224.
- ¹¹ Edmund Leach, "Aryan invasions over the millennia" in Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, (ed.), *Culture through Time: Anthropological Approaches*, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 227–245.